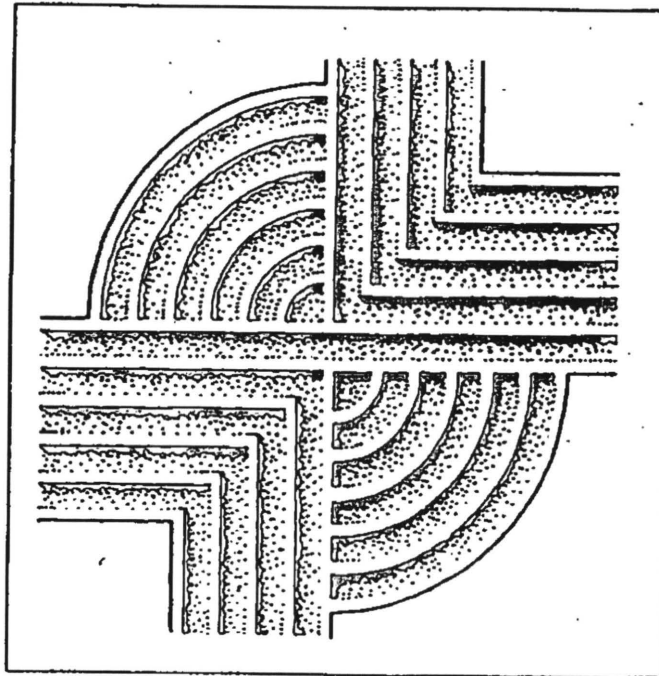


**REMEMBER MAN THOU ART DUST:
COFFIN HARDWARE OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH
CENTURY**



RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 5

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REMEMBER MAN THOU ART DUST:
COFFIN HARDWARE OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Historical archaeologists have increasingly recognized the potential of burials to answer not only questions concerning the osteology and health of populations, but also questions concerning status and society's perception of death and burial. Artifacts found with historic burials have always been realized to hold potential for dating the internment, although most artifacts provide only a broad dating range (see, for example, Rose 1982:68). The significance of the casket or coffin hardware, however, has been of less concern. This is unfortunate, because the hardware can provide supplemental dating and can greatly contribute to an understanding of economic and social status.

The purpose of this paper is to begin, in an orderly and logical fashion, the study of coffin hardware. This discussion should be of use to bio-archaeologists who are involved in burial or cemetery removal projects. This work was born of the fortuitous discovery of a large "cache" of late nineteenth and early twentieth century coffin hardware at the store of A.L. Calhoun, Jr. in Clio, South Carolina.

Clio is a rural, farming community in the central portion of Marlboro County. Marlboro is situated in the northeastern portion of South Carolina's upper coastal plain and, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was oriented toward cotton monoculture. In 1910 over 69% of the land was farmed and over 80% of the farms were operated by tenants, most of

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whom were blacks (United States Department of Commerce 1913:511, 515, 519).

These figures had changed little by 1930 (United States Department of Commerce 1932).

Calhoun's store, which is still in the Calhoun family, was widely known for selling almost anything, from automobiles to coffins. This is captured in the store's slogan: "A.L. Calhoun, Jr. - Dealer in Everything." Calhoun was a shrewd merchant with somewhat unusual purchasing tendencies. On one occasion he bought an entire boxcar load of wooden toothpicks, not because of their demand in Clio, but because of the low, bulk price. We suspect that his buying pattern of coffin hardware was similar (Sherry Gillespie, personal communication).

Oral informants indicate that Calhoun offered plain wood coffins, cloth covered wood caskets, and coffin hardware. Other details concerning the store's business are more sketchy. It appears probable that the rural poor, including farmers and especially tenants, may have brought in "home made" coffins for a minimal amount of hardware, while the middle classes purchased one of the store's selections. Evidence from the store indicates that it was set up to furnish coffins completely.

In 1926 fire spread into the store from an adjacent building, with damage to the store's second story. The coffin trimming room burned and much of Calhoun's hardware was destroyed. According to Calhoun's sons, while he kept the undamaged hardware, he no longer sold it on a regular basis. This terminal date for the hardware of 1926 is supported not only by the burned items, but also by the absence of styles known to occur during the 1940s and 1950s.

Over 650 hardware pieces were discovered in the casket trimming room, including coffin handles, box handles, decorative studs, name plates, thumbscrews, escutchions, and cap lifters. All of these items were found mixed together

in several large boxes where they were placed after the 1926 fire. We first sorted out the various categories of hardware and then sorted each category by styles. Although the handles were routinely sold in pairs to the retailer and then in sets of four to six to the client, we discovered a large quantity of single handles, which provides a further suggestion that a quantity of Calhoun's stock was destroyed by the 1926 fire.

There are six major categories of hardware: handles, thumbscrews, escutchions, name plates, cap lifters, and decorative studs. The handles consist of up to four different parts. The lug is the plate attached to the side of the coffin. The arm attaches the bar to the lug. The bar is that part of the handle which is held to transport the coffin. The tips cover the exposed ends of the bar as it protrudes from either side of the arms (Simmons 1975).

The two major categories of handles involve mobility. When the arm is used, the handle swings. When the bar is attached directly to the lug, the handle is in a fixed position and called stationary. There are two sizes of stationary bars, distinguished by bar length. The extension bar, which runs the length of the coffin, is used in the full length stationary handle. Smaller bars are used for individual stationary handles, usually attached three to a side.

The mobile or swing handle also comes in full length (extension bar) or individual (short bar) sizes, as well as two bar types: the straight bar and the bale bar. The straight bar is directly attached to the arm, which has a swivel attachment to the lug. The straight bar requires tips to cover the ends on either side of the arm. This type of swing handle comes assembled and ready to attach to the coffin. The bars of short bar handles had a variety of forms: round, square, cloth, octagonal swell, plain and fancy swell, and

rope. The bale bar is curved, its ends reaching into the bracket of the lugs. Its ends may also be joined by a small bar which slips under the lug.

As interstate transportation of bodies increased, shipping boxes for the coffins became standard. Box handles used on these shipping boxes were single lug swing bales, frequently of japanned metal. Although it is possible that box handles were also used on outer boxes, as well as shipping boxes, we have found no documentation in either catalogs or trade journals.

Thumbscrews and escutchions were used to attach the lid to the body of the coffin. Thumbscrews may have initially supplemented the use of nails, serving as decorative items, eventually replacing nails altogether. The thumbscrews and associated escutchions were attached along the edge of the coffin at even intervals.

Another category of hardware is the metal name plate which is attached to the lid of the coffin, usually in the center over the thoracic area, by two small nails or pins. These may be factory engraved or stamped with common inscriptions such as "Rest in Peace," "At Rest," "Mother," or "Our Darling." Alternatively, they may be custom engraved by the funeral director at an additional cost.

Decorative studs, stamped from tin, with small tacks soldered to the underside, were placed along the top and side edges of coffins, perhaps covering the coffin nails. Styles include large and small diamonds, ovals, and starred circles. Frequent decorative motifs were floral or star burst patterns.

Cap lifters are door knob-shaped objects used to lift the top panels of the coffin for viewing. They are decorated with matching, cone-shaped bases.

While the examination of hardware styles can be used as a dating

technique, too often other factors, such as local popularity, availability, expense, and wholesale purchasing habits are ignored. It is probable that rural individuals would be conservative in their tastes and prone to retain styles longer than individuals in more urban areas. Obviously, individuals, especially in rural areas, cannot buy what is not available to them, regardless of taste. It is unlikely that many merchants were willing to experiment with new and expensive coffin hardware styles. But perhaps most importantly, price is a major consideration. Regardless of the respect, piety, or veneration a tenant family might have for their deceased loved one, it is unlikely that an expensive coffin or hardware would be purchased on a monthly income of about \$20 (Anonymous 1940:1154; Branson 1923:214; Johnson et al. 1935:11-12). Finally, we have noted that the purchasing habits of A.L. Calhoun, Jr. might have resulted in the store's purchase of out-of-style hardware at low prices. It is doubtful, in a rural community which was already naturally conservative, that such a practice would be noticed, or objected to. Consequently, while hardware styles certainly have broad chronological tendencies, it is probable that other factors will affect their use in dating. The primary result is expected to be an attenuation of style occurrence and/or popularity.

In dating coffin handle styles several primary shifts are obvious. Between 1880 and 1890 there was a shift in emphasis from the swing bale to the two lug short bar, with the short bar popular during the 1880 to 1920 period. Apparently by 1912 extension handles were becoming more popular.

Some of the hardware from the Calhoun collection had patent marks on the reverse faces, which provide date ranges for their manufacture. It is unlikely, although not impossible, that many of the designs would be renewed after almost two decades of use. If we assume that the maximum design patent term of 14 years was issued to the Calhoun hardware designs, we can estimate

when the articles were no longer manufactured or when their molds were changed to remove the dates. Two of the Calhoun short bar handles had patent marks. "Patent July 1895" was found on a single lug handle. Consequently, this item would date between 1895 and 1912. "Patent July 10, 1906" was found on a double lug handle, which indicates a manufacture date between 1906 and 1923. None of the swing bale handles had patent marks. Several of the swing bale handles found in the Calhoun collection are identical to those found in the Cedar Grove Cemetery, which is dated from about 1890 through 1927.

While thumbscrews and escutchions are not particularly useful for dating, one thumbscrew from the Calhoun collection is marked with "MB Co" for Meriden Britannia. This company changed its name to International Silver Company in 1898. It is therefore probable that this item was manufactured prior to that date. An escutcheon was marked "WMM SMITHS PATENT June 8, 1884." Consequently, this item would have a date range from 1884 to 1898.

The decorative studs are equally difficult to date as they lack both patent and manufacturer information. The F.H. Hill Company (c. 1925:122) offers four different styles, indicating their continued manufacture into the twentieth century.

A final point which has been noticed by Orser et al. (1982:462) is worthy of comment. Much of the hardware from Clio, like that found at Millwood, is more elaborate than the hardware illustrated in early twentieth century catalogs. There appears to be a significant reduction in detail and design quality from the late nineteenth through twentieth centuries and while this is hardly sufficient for dating the recovered hardware, it does provide a general framework for future research.

Perhaps the most significant ramification of this study concerns the dating of coffin hardware. The A.L. Calhoun, Jr. store sold coffin

hardware between two, well established, dates -- 1894 and 1926. Thus, it might be reasonable to assume that all items found in the store will date from this period. The 1926 fire does provide a good terminal date; however, we have attempted to show that some of the hardware may predate 1894. More significantly, the assemblage, taken as a whole, does not appear representative of the styles popular in the early twentieth century. Rather, the collection suggests some considerable "stylistic lag." Based on the best information available to us, it appears that the Calhoun collection, although sold during the first quarter of the twentieth century, contains items which may predate the store's opening by up to two decades. Whether this represents solely the merchandising of A.L. Calhoun, Jr., or it reflects the poor, rural nature of Marlboro County, or some other undetermined factor, could not be readily discerned. Certainly Calhoun had an idiosyncratic buying pattern. Marlboro County is also a poor, rural section of South Carolina and it is difficult imagining the farmers, most of them tenants, spending any significant sum for funeral services. Regardless, these data should caution archaeologists to the pitfalls of dating burial hardware. It may be possible, on stylistic grounds, to date coffin hardware, but it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to quantify the prevailing cultural and economic biases.

A second ramification of this study concerns the price structure of the coffin hardware offered at the A.L. Calhoun, Jr. store. Although some stylish goods were offered, even they represented the lower end of the scale. Based on examination of period catalogs, a coffin could be trimmed, using six handles, for under \$1.20. At the time of Calhoun's fire, trimming a coffin with minimal hardware might have a wholesale cost of as little as \$2.70. The retail cost might be as much as \$5 or \$6. Orser et al. (1982:462) estimate that a box might be trimmed for less than \$10.

These data suggest that Calhoun, as a wise salesman, ensured that his stock reflected the price his patrons were able to pay, rather than the newest styles as illustrated in The Casket or Southern Funeral Director.

As Hohenschuh states,

The funeral director should have an ample stock for his requirements from the very plainest coffins to such caskets as would be an average demand for his community Finer goods, for which there may be a demand in only rare cases, can be ordered by telegraph or telephone and received by express.

(Hohenschuh c. 1900:39-40).

Consequently, Calhoun stocked abundant swing bale handles and decorative studs for the "very plainest" and fancier short bar handles for the "average casket." If stationary or extension bars were called for, it appears that they were ordered.

A more thorough knowledge of coffin hardware, its various functions, and its placement would be of considerable benefit to archaeologists charged with burial removals. This study has attempted to describe the more common hardware items. Archaeologists should endeavor to excavate burials in such a way that it is possible to find all hardware items and to accurately record their position in the grave. The number of items, such as handles or thumbscrews, may provide significant information on the individual's economic status. The use of nails to secure the handles rather than screws may also be an indication of economic status. The presence of shipping box handles may indicate that the individual was shipped from the place of death to be buried with other family members.

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